

**Remarks of  
Senator Charles S. Robb  
The United States Merchant Marine Academy Commencement  
Kings Point, New York  
June 21, 1999**

Administrator Hart, Admiral Stewart, flag and general officers, other distinguished guests, faculty, midshipmen, parents, family, friends and most important of all, members of the Class of '99 -- I am honored to have been invited to join you on this very important and meaningful occasion. Graduates, I salute you for all that you have accomplished at this prestigious institution. And I salute you, Admiral Stewart, for your illustrious career in the Marine Corps and for your leadership of the Merchant Marine Academy here at Kings Point.

I would also like to recognize six graduates from the Republic of Panama, including the class valedictorian, Adrian Lugomer-Pomper. And while I'm at it, let me reassure your class president that where he finishes in class standings isn't fatal. One of my closest friends in the United States Senate likes to remind audiences that he finished fifth from the bottom at Annapolis -- and he's running for President for the United States!

I note with pride that there are twenty-two women in the class of 1999. This was the first federal academy to admit women -- a quarter-century ago -- and you bring to 370 the total number of female graduates since 1978. As a former Marine who spent thirty-four years in the Naval Service before retiring in 1991, and whose uncle served in the Merchant Marine in World War II, I'm pleased that thirty-four members of this class -- almost 20% -- will report for active duty: nineteen to the Navy, six to the Coast Guard, five to the Air Force, three to the Marine Corps and one to the United States Army. My sincere congratulations for adding to the long list of Kings Point accomplishments!

Today, as we honor the members of the Class of 1999 -- the marine and transportation professionals of the future -- we also reaffirm the continuing role of the United States Merchant Marine Academy in protecting and defending this nation. There is perhaps no more vivid reminder of the challenges and risks we face than this: the very first USMAA graduating class, and this last graduating class of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have each witnessed armed conflict in Europe. Indeed, who could have imagined half a century ago that the same kind of ethnic and religious bigotry and violence that spawned World War II would suddenly recur as we prepare for the new millennium, and that, once again, American resolve and intervention would make the difference in bringing a terrible conflict to a conclusion we hope will prove just and honorable?

Some fifty-five years may have passed, and cruise missiles and stealth aircraft may have largely replaced howitzers and grenades, but we can all be grateful for one constant in our defense posture -- the critical importance and enduring relevance of our merchant marine in war and peacetime crisis. I need not remind this audience that the most difficult and crucial victory in America's history simply would not have happened without the "Fourth Arm of Defense" that moved food and supplies from America to Europe and beyond. And

today we draw inspiration from the fact that the United States and its allies have accomplished something of lasting importance in Kosovo, and that these kinds of successful operations aren't possible without the dedicated merchant mariners who carry material and provide fast sealift support to the men and women of our armed forces. We have learned this lesson well in the decades since World War II, as you have answered this nation's call and served with valor in Korea, in Vietnam, and in the Persian Gulf, as well as in humanitarian missions to Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia and, now, Kosovo.

This is no accident; it is our proud heritage. We are, and always will be, a sea-going nation. Since the earliest days of our democracy, we have recognized that there are vital interests around which the bulk of our national security strategy should be formulated and organized, and which we have to be willing to go to war, if necessary, to defend. One of these vital interests is freedom of the seas – maintaining the freedom of trade to support our forces abroad, and our friends and allies overseas in promoting international peace, stability and prosperity.

We continue to depend on sealift to move 95% of our materiel in response to events in distant regions of the world, where we may have no permanent presence and where infrastructure is limited. The officers and midshipmen of the merchant marine are truly the workhorses of our routine peacetime deployment efforts, and the guarantors of our strategic military readiness in time of crisis, conflict, and war – in short, an irreplaceable national asset.

I do not see this changing in any way in the foreseeable future. Today, as throughout our history, we are faced with significant threats to freedom on the seas. These threats come mainly from the influence of rogue states on sea lanes and choke points like the Straits of Hormuz, which can and do threaten our naval forces with relatively cheap sea mines and conventional submarines. In order to counter these threats, we have to retain the strategic capability to reconstitute our forces, to replace munitions and equipment used in combat and to supply the fuel, weapons, and other critical resources we need to sustain our armed forces in conflict.

A well-trained Strategic Sealift and Ready Reserve force, the prepositioning of equipment, the right mix of ships and aircraft, a strong partnership with the commercial transportation industry – all of these are critical to support the warfighter and to get the job done. There may be no more vivid demonstration of this capability than in the Persian Gulf War, when the Merchant Marine force ensured that we were able to project power quickly and effectively in order to defeat Saddam Hussein.

Maintaining a reliable and responsive mobility in order to defend our interests is not, and has never been, an inexpensive proposition. But I believe the investments we have made in improving our strategic sealift are a relatively cheap insurance policy for sustaining the warfighter during the fight. In Congress we recognize this. I am pleased that the defense and commerce committees in particular have robustly funded the lift requirements of our armed forces for several years running. We are continuing our acquisition of brand new Large Medium Speed Roll-on/Roll-off vessels, or LMSRs. We are expanding the capabilities

of the LMSRs we already have with a significant deck modification project. And finally, we are strengthening our Voluntary Intermodal Sealift Agreement program, or VISA, to ensure contingency access to sealift capacity from the civil sector. From my perspective on the Senate Armed Services Committee -- and I served previously on the Commerce Committee -- I am confident these upward funding trends will continue; we in the Congress recognize the importance of our strategic lift forces to meet the needs of our National Military Strategy.

In my view, the revitalization and future growth of the United States maritime industry is equally critical to this nation's defense. History has repeatedly proven -- and Congress has affirmed -- that the United States needs a strong, active, competitive and militarily-useful United States-flag commercial maritime industry. We have an obligation to ensure that we continue to have the militarily-useful commercial vessels and trained and loyal United States citizen crews we need to support our interests around the world. And we must support those programs and policies that will better enable our maritime industry to flourish in peacetime. And we must continue to find innovative ways to strengthen the competitiveness of United States-flag vessel operations by providing greater opportunities for American vessel owners to accumulate the private capital necessary to build modern, efficient and economical commercial vessels in American shipyards.

I'd like to talk just for a moment about the real strength of our Merchant Marine and of all our Armed Services -- our people. They are the heart and soul of our warfighting capability. Without them, the best and most modern equipment is useless. As you know, there has been significant debate within the Congress and among the public recently on the state of military readiness, particularly with our troops stretched so thin by recent events. Today as we convene for this ceremony, over 240,000 troops are deployed to about 130 countries. We can't truly reward these men and women in uniform sufficiently for all they are doing.

That is why we must ensure that they are compensated fairly with pay, benefits, and a retirement system on a par with the private sector. To do otherwise is to risk returning to a hollow force, where our best and brightest walk out the door, and we can't attract enough members of the next generation of soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and, yes, merchant mariners. I am proud that the Congress has approved the most significant improved pay and benefits package in a generation. It is simply the right thing to do.

Of course, there is another part of this readiness equation. We know that in order to maintain our position of leadership in the new world order and to secure the future of democracy, we must not forget the lessons of the past. Sixty years ago, President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke against belligerent nations that were "...creating a state of international anarchy and instability from which there is no escape through mere isolation or neutrality." At the onset of the Second World War, Roosevelt knew that America would be pivotal to the outcome of that war. But there were powerful forces arrayed against him; just as today, many Americans believed that Europe could take care of itself without non-European or specifically, American, intervention. President Roosevelt knew he had to take a decisive step to preserve world peace but he also knew he had to be able to count on the American people.

These were simpler, and some say, far better times for those who are inspired by a sense of civic duty. By that I mean the renewed sense of patriotism behind the popularity of Steven Spielberg's film "Saving Private Ryan" and Tom Brokaw's new book "The Greatest Generation" and Steven Ambrose's "Magnificent". Part of the distinguished legacy of the Roosevelt generation is here with us today -- the heroes of the United States Merchant Marine, who fifty years ago came together in purpose and resolve against the aggression of a genocidal dictator. More than 250,000 men and women served in the United States Merchant Marine during the Second World War; at least 6,830 were killed at sea; 1 in 32 members of the United States Merchant Marine serving in the Second World War died in the line of duty, suffering a higher percentage of war-related deaths during that war than any of the other armed services of the United States.

You have a proud heritage -- one that you can take with you wherever you go. And Americans are as proud of what you are doing today to help advance the cause of freedom and democracy in the Balkans as they were fifty-five years ago, when Europe fell dark, and every merchant marine officer and midshipman in action was a hero.

Those of you who are graduating today are accepting a significant call to public service through the commissions you will accept. And most of us here to celebrate the occasion with you are a little bit envious. I'd like to ask everyone who came here to see someone graduate to reflect on the core values of service to country embodied by the Kings Point Class of 1999. I'd like to ask you to reflect on the paths these graduates have chosen, paths with the potential to be of enormous benefit to our nation. As these young men and women take their oaths of service, I ask that you think about ways to inspire others to excel as they undoubtedly will excel. I'd like to ask you to think about ways to enhance civic involvement, and especially, ways to integrate the concepts of responsibility and citizenship into the public dialogue.

I strongly believe that bringing people together to improve the quality of civic life could help restore to American society the sense of collective duty and shared sacrifice represented by the World War II generation of Merchant Mariners, by all of our courageous veterans, and by the Kings Point class of 1999. And to each of our graduates I say: you are role models for national service because you embrace the core American values of character, discipline, involvement and personal responsibility.

And as you leave this very special place, pause for a moment and relish your success. Know that you have the tools to chart the course for whatever you want your future to be. I challenge you to seize your moment in time, to write your chapter in the history of this great land. But for today -- relax and enjoy! You've earned it.

Again, I offer you my warmest congratulations and wish you "fair winds and following seas" into the new millennium! May God bless you and your loved ones, this U.S. Merchant Marine Academy and each alumnus, and may God bless the United States of America. Thank you.